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BOOKS

THE OLD DEPENDABLES

SMILEY'S PEOPLE. *By John le Carré. 374 pages. Knopf. $10.95.*

John le Carré's expert new thriller completes a triad begun in "Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy" and continued in "The Honourable Schoolboy." I say triad instead of trilogy because I made the experiment of reading the newest book first, to see if a greenhorn who never got around to the earlier installments of the George Smiley saga could enter the maze unarmed. It can be done. "Smiley's People" is independently enjoyable, in some ways the best of the three—easier to follow than "Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy" and more concise than the overblown "The Honourable Schoolboy."

George Smiley is a British version of our old friend Clark Kent, except that he doesn't even have to repair to a phone booth to burst out strong. He is the best spy in the world, though fat, bespectacled, short of breath and constantly cuckolded by his wife, Ann. The country he represents has declined to a second-rate power, and even there Smiley has been discarded and is repeatedly called back to right the mistakes of more modern bureaucrats.

POWER PLAY: Is the daydream content of these hugely popular books clear enough? Le Carré excels at scenes of bureaucratic power play, mostly populated by males, like the conference in "The Honourable Schoolboy" at which Smiley defends his operations against a budget cut. We used to read escape novels in which the hero wielded his fists, got slugged, rose and went on. Now we have a romantic hero who simply plods along, summons up files, polishes his glasses on the end of his tie and, most important, feels. George Smiley is us when we don't shine in action, can't come up with repartee, but know ourselves to be, somehow, superior to our surroundings. Oddly, the Smiley saga contains very little public politics. Saigon falls almost without a trace in "The Honourable Schoolboy," while the novel pursues the titular hero's sexual infatuation to a tragic conclusion.

"Smiley's People" proceeds to a similar ending, which, of course, I am bound not to reveal. The secret is personal, familial; I find myself disappointed that it isn't political. The book should be broader. Nonetheless, I read it in a constant state of excitement. An elderly Russian exile in Paris is approached by a Soviet agent, who promises passage to the West for her daughter. A photograph of the daughter seems a fake to the mother: the Russians apparently intend to plant a spy in the West. Then another photo is passed aboard a ferry in Hamburg, with elaborate assurances of its importance: two men, with their hired doxies, nude in a whorehouse. How, in this permissive era, can that be valuable? An elderly Russian general, honorably retired in London and no longer considered important by his British hosts, is murdered for having this photo and a letter from Paris in his possession.

Patrick Ward

Le Carré: The best spy is fat and short of breath

The game is afoot, as we used to say, and le Carré's book is about elderly, untrusted spies, whose advice, once ignored, is now urgently sought—the fabulous Connie Sachs, introduced here with great fanfare, dying in retirement with a girlfriend in Oxford and revealed, now that I've gone back to read the preceding volumes, as a perennial bore; Toby Esterhase, who now runs an art gallery; Peter Guillam, now posted in Paris and married to a French woman whose awful stationery is decorated with bunnies. Smiley's people are back in numbers, just as this novel is.

But we need them. Le Carré's British Secret Service wins an admiration for the underdog that we would not grant to the CIA. His operatives are toothless father figures, impeccable in behavior, steady in procedure. They are our dependables.

DEADLY QUIET: "Smiley's People" is nearing its halfway point when we hear the ominous name of Karla, the Russian spymaster Smiley has battled for years. Karla's defeat—or Smiley's—is the obligatory scene toward which these books have moved. The ending le Carré has devised is deadly quiet and appropriately moving.

Snow falls over Berlin, quietness reigns. Many of the book's best moments detail the silence of virtuosos: Smiley's rendezvous aboard a boat docked on the East German border is one of the bleakest and most telling scenes le Carré has ever written, and, characteristically, it concerns a discredited spy whose veracity has been discounted by all his British masters except Smiley. "Smiley's People," which abounds in such breath-stopping scenes, is an enormously skilled and satisfying work.

WALTER CLEMONS